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Reagan Warns 5 Nations of U.S. Right To Defend Itself Against Acts of Terror

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan warned that the U.S. has a legal right to defend itself against five nations that he claimed are sponsoring terrorist "acts of war" against America.

Mr. Reagan's remarks to a gathering here of the American Bar Association appeared to be an effort to provide a legal framework for U.S. reprisals against terrorist groups and the countries that sponsor them.

Mr. Reagan identified five countries—Iran, Libya, North Korea, Cuba and Nicaragua—as part of "a confederation of terrorist states" and "a new, international version of Murder Inc."

In a significant passage of his speech, Mr. Reagan said: "These terrorist states are now engaged in acts of war against the government and people of the U.S. And under international law, any state which is the victim of acts of war has the right to defend itself."

Mr. Reagan said the U.S. would use "the full weight of the law . . . to indict, apprehend and prosecute" terrorists. He added that the U.S. will act, "unilaterally, if necessary," to prevent terrorists from receiving training or sanctuary "anywhere."

The tough-talking speech raises the decibel level of the Reagan administration's anti-terrorism effort and seeks to build public support for reprisals. But it isn't yet clear whether it is a prelude to actual U.S. strikes against terrorist training camps or bases.

An administration official said yesterday that top officials would like to retaliate against the hijackers of TWA Flight 847, for example, but that they are weighing the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

One move that is under way, officials said yesterday, is an effort to find and punish the individuals who hijacked the TWA plane. The U.S. initially has asked the Lebanese government—including the minister of justice, Shiite leader Nabih Berri—to arrest and prosecute the hijackers or extradite them to the U.S. for prosecution.

If legal cooperation with Lebanon fails, as seems likely, then the U.S. may consider a special "operation" to seize the

suspects and, perhaps, bring them to the U.S. for trial, according to one administration official.

One precedent for such an operation is the Israeli government's seizure in the 1960s of Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann; he was later tried, convicted and executed in Israel.

U.S. officials note that one problem with legalistic approaches to terrorism, such as the arrest and trial of suspected terrorists, is that such steps may encourage acts of kidnapping or sabotage aimed at freeing individuals held by the U.S. or other governments.

For example, Kuwait has been a target of repeated attacks ever since it arrested 17 terrorists involved in bomb attacks against the American embassy and other facilities in Kuwait.

Mr. Reagan's speech focused on the five nations he contends sponsor terrorism, rather than on individual groups.

He noted, for example, that "in 1983 alone, the Central Intelligence Agency either confirmed or found strong evidence of Iranian involvement in 57 terrorist attacks." This emphasis on state-supported terrorism suggests that the administration may be considering new political, diplomatic or economic sanctions against the five countries Mr. Reagan named.

Conspicuously absent from Mr. Reagan's list was Syria, a country that remains on the State Department's list of nations that support terrorism, and one that U.S. officials have often cited as a sponsor of such activity in Lebanon.

By omitting Syria, Mr. Reagan seemed to be noting the role of Syrian President Hafez Assad in helping to free the TWA hostages and seeking more help from him to free an additional seven Americans held by a pro-Iranian faction in Lebanon.